

Media convergence enriching foreign language learning and guiding the way to media literacy

Jutta Rymarczyk & Karin Vogt | Heidelberg

Ausgehend von der Diskussion, warum es so schwierig ist, Lernende an literarische Texte heranzuführen, schlagen die Autorinnen den Gebrauch von Medienkonvergenz oder eines transmedialen Ansatzes vor, um die Situation im Fremdsprachenunterricht zu verbessern. Sie legen dar, dass die Berücksichtigung eines Genres wie diskontinuierlichen Texten sowie spannungsreichen Geschichten ein Weg sein könnte, um das Interesse der Lernenden zu wecken. Mithilfe der Kombination der Graphic Novel *The Arrival* in ihrer Originalform, dem Bilderbuch, und als Theaterstück, das in Teilen im Internet angeschaut werden kann, wird erläutert, wie Visual Literacy den fremdsprachlichen Leseprozess vereinfachen kann.



Mehr Beiträge zu diesem Thema:

www.babylonia.ch >

Thematisches Archiv > Themen 3 und 8

Making literary texts accessible to and interesting for school students presents a challenge in the case of both primary and secondary school students, in first as well as foreign language classrooms. Taking different perspectives into account, we gain a complex picture: Looking at the institutional level, a first reason might be found in the marginalisation of literary texts in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom at early secondary level (grades 5-10) (Diehr & Surkamp, forthcoming).

When looking at the students themselves, a second reason emerges: the PISA-Study showed that there are gender-specific differences when it comes to reading. With the exception of Korea, in all other participating countries it was the group made up of girls which manifested a significantly higher interest in reading and consistently better achievements (Stanat & Kunter 2002: 37ff.).

Zooming in even further, we see that different text genres also determine the outcomes: Stanat & Kunter report that a different picture arises when boys are given the chance to read discontinuous texts (*ibid.*), i.e. graphic novels, comics or non-fictional texts interspersed with illustrations, graphs, maps, etc. Male students achieve better results in tests when these are based on the

reading of discontinuous texts. Möbius' overview (2006: 134) adds that boys prefer computer games, current music and films in their media consumption, whereas girls' top three preferences are current music, soaps and films. As far as content is concerned, it is reported that male students are mostly attracted by adventure stories (64%). For our further line of argument it might be worthwhile noting that this preference is met by 58% of the female readers.

We can discern the following interdisciplinary steps that are linked to the items discussed above: *Definition of literary competences:* Literary competences need to be defined as clearly as possible and should be extended to cover media competences due to the necessity of working with different media if student interest is to be met.

Genre: Both girls' and boys' genre and media preferences need to be met by also taking film and discontinuous texts (especially comics and graphic novels) into account.

Multimedia: A wide consideration of different media is required if literary texts and film are to be combined in order to meet student preferences. This can take the form of a media convergent approach or a transmedia approach.

Content: Excitement-filled stories like adventure stories should be chosen to gain the boys' interest in a particular content but also to address the girls.

1. Definition of literary competences

The need to define literary competences has also been postulated by Diehr & Surkamp (forthcoming). Using three dimensions they list a set of sub-skills which bridge the large gap between the way in which primary school students deal with literary texts and the older students' literary competences up to A-level standards (i.e. *Abitur*, the highest German school-leaving qualification) (*ibid.* p. 1f.). These three dimensions are best illustrated by exemplary sub-skills (*ibid.* p. 4):

- a. **The attitudinal dimension:** to be able to empathise with characters and different views
- b. **The linguistic-discursive dimension:** to be able to give creative form to one's own (literary, visual or filmic) texts following a literary text or to further develop textual sources
- c. **The aesthetic-cognitive dimension:** to be able to recognize, name and interpret selected aesthetic means in a particular genre.

2. Genres

A stronger focus on film can help spark student interest in narratives in general and in literary texts in particular. Watching the film version of a literary text, students may start to pay attention to a particular aspect of the story and they might want to get to know more and/or different facets of this aspect which can then be found in the written text (Möbius, 2006).

Theoretically, discontinuous texts could also work in the same way. However, only few literary texts have been transformed into a comic or a graphic novel. Nevertheless, comics and graphic novels can contribute to an increase in student reading competence in another way; the pictures which accompany the written text facilitate text comprehension to a high degree. It is important to note that this does not entail a trivialization of the reading process which might deter good readers from turning to comics and graphic novels. Teachers reporting on their experience with graphic novels stress that poorer readers can be addressed without losing stronger readers. A teacher who worked with Spiegelman's Pulitzer-award winning "Mouse" on the topic of the *Holocaust* writes: "Students who were reluctant to read the normal text [continuous written texts, J.R./K.V.] found the novel accessible and students who were able to read and understand the textbook found the novel interesting" (Saxon quoted in Carter, 2008: 50). At the same time, picturebooks in general and our example of a graphic novel in particular enable learners to verbalise their impressions and interpretations of the visual element, thus allowing for follow-up communication in the classroom.

In order to make use of the facilitating nature of pictures in foreign language learning, visual literacy has to be fostered in students and teachers alike. Recent publications dealing with the prominent role of pictures in the foreign language classroom or with places outside school, which are rewarding for foreign language learners because of their visual character, prove the topicality of the notion of visual literacy (cf. the chapters in the volumes by Hecke & Surkamp, 2010 and Rymarczyk, 2013, respectively).

This topicality and relevance of visual literacy requires a broad definition. One which underlines its support of cognitive operations including language is formulated by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory/Metiri Group who are specialized in bringing together new media and cognition: "The ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning" (NCREL/Metiri Group, 2003: 15). In line with this, the aim of film literacy according to Lütge (2013: 89) is to "enable students to 'read' audiovisual images rather than passively consume them".

Both films and plays (as theatre performances) unite all of the advantages of including pictures with other nonverbal aspects that might facilitate linguistic comprehension. Nonverbal and paralinguistic aspects such as gestures, mime, intonation, and body language are of importance and function as comprehension facilitators. At the same time, these aspects only receive little consideration in the regular foreign language classroom (Henseler, Möller & Surkamp, 2011). Haß & Kieweg (2012) maintain that the multiple coding aspect of audiovisual learning material helps weaker language learners to understand the plot, thus making audiovisual material potentially conducive to language learning in heterogeneous or inclusive learning groups as well.

With plays, Surkamp (2013: 132) considers the acoustic and optic dimensions that function as signifiers. Comparable to a film plot, learners see the target language as contextualised language that is embedded in situations and interactions. This might make the language more accessible to students, she concludes. In this respect, films and theatre performances offer opportunities for follow-up communication comparable to those provided by graphic novels. Students can verbalise their perceptions and ideas and thus their viewer response.

3. Multimedia

Foreign Language Learning researchers seem to agree on the importance of using a variety of different media.

We chose to use the term "media convergence" following Jenkins (2006: 2f.) who coined the term:

"By convergence I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about."

Before we move on to look at our example of media convergence more closely, we have to deal with the question of how exactly media convergence can support students in the foreign language classroom in their endeavour to read literary texts and enjoy reading them. In order to do

this, it is possible to draw from many sources offering very similar suggestions. Generally, either the choice of texts and follow-up texts is underlined or the different forms of representation of one particular content and their different perspectives – the only difference in all of these suggestions being the depth of detail into which they go.

Our answer to how media convergence can support students in reading literary texts revolves around the notion of visual literacy and thus goes into greater detail. Decoding a visual (or audio-visual) text effectively allows students to transfer pieces of content information to written media which are then less challenging for them.

4. Content

Whatever visual or audio-visual medium we look at, graphic novels, films or performances of plays, narrative competence is almost always required. They all tell a story, and – depending on personal levels – recipients have to be able to understand (complex) stories, to recognise (and use) the most important genres, and to recognize (and name) the most important elements and building blocks of stories (Haß, 2013: 6).

Taking up the discussion of gender issues influencing reading motivation and success (see Section 2 above), the questions of “Who?” (Who are the protagonists?) and “What?” (What is happening?) seem to be most relevant. Boys in particular have to be provided with a character they can identify with. This offer of identification should motivate students to want to move on to following texts, i.e. to accept the arrangement put together for transmedia reading. Male students’ desire for action should furthermore be noted. Adventure stories, risk and danger, and even plots lacking social desirability (e.g. leading to somebody’s death) are of interest to young male readers (Möbius, 2006).

5. An example of a media set of texts

The two texts we suggest be put together as an example of medial connection are Shaun Tan’s young adult graphic novel *The Arrival*, and the play of the same name, both about the lives of immigrants. Using easily accessible Youtube videos of performances, our example illustrates how traditional print and electronic media can effectively be combined. In this combination we take the boys’ reading preferences into account, namely by choosing the discontinuous text form of the graphic novel. Also, the topic “immigration” should resonate with our students, many of whom possess a migration background. Last but not least, the story contains adventurous elements, which are favoured by boys, especially within the embedded flashbacks.

The Arrival is a very special kind of graphic novel as it does not contain a single word. Obviously, such a “silent” graphic novel requires a very specific kind of reading skills, i.e. one which is based on visual literacy. It is important to note that while the lack of words might provoke student utterances more than a written text, text production might be more demanding with no words and structures to be taken up from the original text itself. Consequently, it seems important to direct student attention to elements which are familiar to them and which can be verbalized fairly easily: Who? Where? When? What?

Once content parallels are found, we need to turn to the level of form and see how the respective elements are realized in the different texts. Here we face different challenges: At first sight, one and the same story represented by different media (i.e. *The Arrival* as a graphic novel and a theatre performance) might seem to be the easiest media connection to work with. After all, the different media tell the same

story. However, the different representations require the students to work with different skills: They have to

- combine the visual information of the graphic novel with the audio-visual information of the play;
- bring together the permanent colour of the print medium with the more quickly changing light and hence colour of the stage;
- relate the graphic novel’s two-dimensional character to the three-dimensional space of the stage.

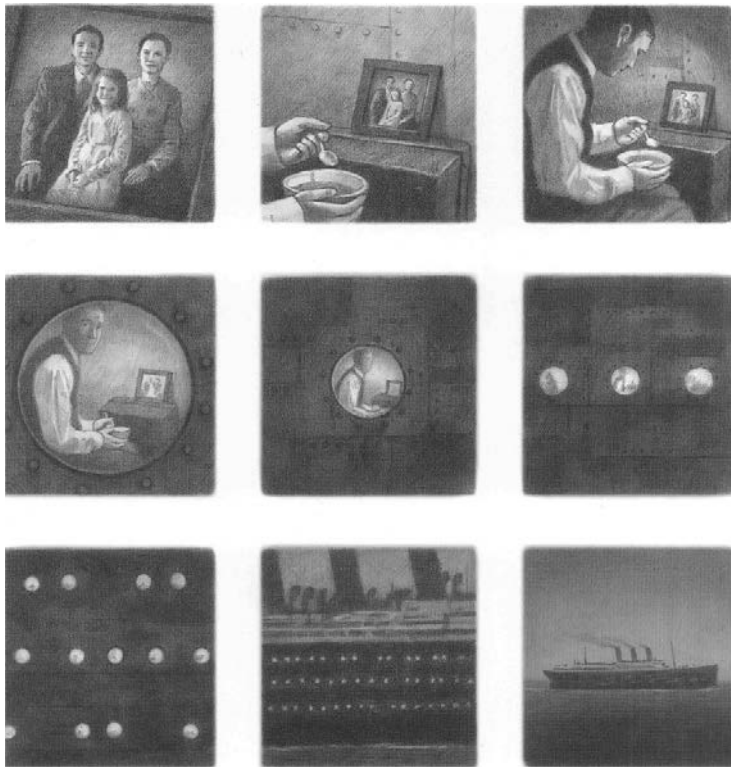
Because of this, it is essential to train students first in visual literacy, to teach them elementary decoding skills based on colour, composition, and their repertoires of shapes. In the following we turn to how place, time and atmosphere can be conveyed by purely visual means.

How pictures convey a notion of place

Tan’s graphic novel *The Arrival* is a good start to teach visual literacy because Tan knows how to play with his readers’ expectations, sometimes even leading them astray on purpose. At the same time, however, he also guides them carefully out of their misinterpretation, step by step and panel by panel. The moments of surprise when students realise their misinterpretation surely help remember visual means representing place (Rymarczyk 2011). In Chapter I one sees how the protagonist is taken to the station by his wife and daughter and how he leaves by train. Chapter II starts with the depiction of a framed family photo which the reader knows the man put in his suitcase. In the first three pictures of this page (which contains nine panels in a regular 3-by-3 layout) we see that the man is sitting in front of this framed picture, eating (cf. Fig. 1). At this point teachers could ask their students where the man is, as here, most readers will assume that the man has already reached his destination. In fact, the next six panels tell a different story:

Both films and plays (as theatre performances) unite all of the advantages of including pictures with other nonverbal aspects that might facilitate linguistic comprehension.

Fig. 1. Beginning of Chapter II, Shaun Tan: *The Arrival*



Reproduced with the kind permission of Lothian Books and Hachette Australia.

In panel 4, the picture of the man eating in front of the framed picture seems like a second framed photo, only this time with a round frame. (Again, here one might want to ask what students think they see.) Panel 5 suddenly enlarges the frame of this second photo and makes the picture itself smaller – which contradicts our expectations and what we know about picture frames. Panels 6 and 7 then confuse us for good as what we think is the picture frame is enlarged even more to contain three smaller, round pictures, which then turn into thirteen even smaller ones. Only the last but one panel makes clear that there are no further picture frames, with the very last panel revealing a ship. In retrospect we then realise that what we thought was a round picture frame is in fact the porthole of a ship. We then further realise that the family photo is in the man's cabin and that he has not yet reached his destination but that he is still on his way to this obviously very remote place (cf. Tan, 2006: 14').

Here students learn that pictures can

- evoke expectations and ideas;
- lead us astray;
- sometimes also only enable us to decode their correct meaning in retrospect.

Students will be able to compare the picture sequence described here with the single pictures of a film, i.e. a camera which zooms out from a close-up into a long shot. Furthermore, the creation of false

expectations about the place (final destination instead of means of transport) suggests that the exile chosen by the protagonist is much more remote than first supposed.

How pictures convey a notion of time and atmosphere

In *The Arrival* time periods and atmosphere are depicted as simply and effectively as places. The duration of the man's trip, for example, becomes obvious on five consecutive pages whose panels either show seascapes with the ship or clouds. The picture sequence starts with a panel which covers the entire double page (*ibid.* 15f.). It shows the ship on a calm sea under a massive cloud. On turning the page, one sees another double page, albeit designed in an entirely different way (*ibid.* 17f.). While the first double page with the smallest number of pictures (namely one) suggests peace and constancy, this second double page is filled with thirty panels, the largest amount to be found per double page in the entire book. All panels show clouds ranging in colour from a soft, light grey to various shades of sepia to dark anthracite – except the last panel, which shows a cloudless sky. The different cloud formations tell the viewer about the different kinds of weather on the journey. Small fair-weather clouds appear next to bizarre single formations, heaps of clouds or even cyclones. It becomes obvious that these various weather conditions cannot have possibly existed on the very same day, not even on two or three days. Turning the page once more (cf. Fig. 2), we notice again how long the journey must have been because we still do not see the final destination but again the tranquillity and constancy of the first seascape. However, we do not find the ship on the left side of the page as before but on the right side (*ibid.* 19). Following on from page 15 there arise the dynamics of a ship moving from left to right which in western cultures, which write from left to right, are perceived as positive and striving forward.

Fig. 2. Shaun Tan: *The Arrival*, p. 19.



Reproduced with the kind permission of Lothian Books and Hachette Australia.

The forward motion as well as the corresponding positive impression are not just a result of the composition of the picture but also of the distribution of light and dark. In the first seascape the left part of the picture with the ship lies in the light. The left side of the heap of clouds is illuminated by the sun whereas the right half of the picture – the sailing direction of the ship – lies in the dark. In contrast to this, in the second seascape, the sun comes from the direction the ship is heading for. The ship moves on water glistening in the sun and leaves the darkness behind. Students will most probably be able to perceive the time span and to interpret the atmosphere correctly. Searching for the stylistic means which convey these aspects can be practiced easily using the pages mentioned above.

How the dynamic character of theatre performances conveys a notion of atmosphere

The dynamic character of the New Zealand Red Leap Theatre performance (www.redleaptheatre.co.nz, accessible on www.youtube.com/watch?v=23WtXz-GaS4) of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* can multiply the effect on learners when reflected upon properly. When looking at the

double page in part one of the novel, the family is moving across the city, looking small and vulnerable against the backdrop of massive rows of houses. Something like dragons' tails seem to be present and make the viewer feel threatened. The dark colours used add to the feeling of insecurity. When these tails are actually seen moving across the stage in the theatre production, just failing to swat the family members, their intimidating effect is much heightened. The dynamic visuals in this scene go hand in hand with the lighting and the music, which are dramatic and indicate danger. No word is spoken.

The non-verbal actions along with facial expressions (the protagonist first looks afraid, then, in haste, takes his leave while his wife comes back to embrace him again but then turns around to protect their terrified daughter) have a powerful effect on the viewer and can be verbalized in several ways. The scene concludes with house walls closing in on the protagonist and he is left alone on the centre stage, in the spotlight, standing with his suitcase and embarking on his journey.

Follow-up communication in the classroom will be much facilitated with the application of a multimodal, transmedia arrangement. Learners could discuss how they felt just watching the scene, they could take the perspective of the protagonist or a family member, e.g. the daughter as a peer, and say, draw or write in thought bubbles what they might be thinking or saying. Thus they could verbalize their response in a creative way that could then be presented to the whole group and traced back to the original work of art, for example by finding out more about the dragons' tails.

6. Conclusion and outlook

In this article, we have attempted to show how media convergence, in our example a graphic novel and a theatre play, can help foster media literacy and facilitate comprehension at the same time by their multiple coding aspects. Thus we hope to develop both linguistic and literary competences in all our learners, reluctant readers included.

Notes

¹ The page numbers given here are not part of *The Arrival*. They were integrated by the authors to facilitate orientation for the readers of this article. The counting begins on the first page of the first chapter which appears on the left side and is marked with the Roman numeral I.

References

- Carter, J. B. (2008). Comics, the Canon, and the Classroom. In N. Frey & D. Fisher (eds.), *Teaching Visual Literacy. Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and more to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*, (pp.47-60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Diehr, B. & Surkamp, C. (forthcoming). Der Aufbau literaturbezogener Kompetenzen in der Sekundarstufe I. Literarisches Curriculum, Textauswahl und Unterrichtsvorschläge. In W. Hallet, U. Krämer & C. Surkamp (eds.), *Literaturdidaktik* (working title). Seelze: Klett-Kallmeyer.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1975). *Learning how to mean*. London: Arnold.

Haß, F. (2013). Let Me Tell You a Story. Geschichten verstehen und erzählen lernen. In *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch* 121/122 (Jg. 47), 4-8.

Haß, F. & Kieweg, W. (2012). *I can make it! Englischunterricht für Schülerinnen und Schülern mit Lernschwierigkeiten*. Seelze: Klett-Kallmeyer.

Hecke, C. & Surkamp, C. (eds.) (2010). *Bilder im Fremdsprachenunterricht: Neue Ansätze, Kompetenzen und Methoden*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.

Henseler, R., Möller, S. & Surkamp, C. (2011). *Filme im Englischunterricht. Grundlagen, Methoden, Genres*. Seelze: Klett-Kallmeyer.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide*. New York et al.: New York University Press.

Lütge, C. (2013). Exploring cinema worlds – perspectives for and beyond the EFL classroom. In J. Rymarczyk (ed.), *Foreign Language Learning Outside School. Places to see, learn and enjoy*, (pp.89-98). Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Peter Lang.

Möbius, T. (2006). Hans Christian Andersens *Schwefelhölzer* medial entflammt. Eine Lesechance für Jungen und ein Anlass für

Sehgespräche. In P. Josting & H. Hoppe (eds.), *Mädchen, Jungen und ihre Medienkompetenzen. Aktuelle Diskurse und Praxisbeispiele für den (Deutsch-)Unterricht*, (pp.134-150). München: kopaed.

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory/Metiri Group (2003). *Literacy in the Digital Age*. Naperville (IL). <http://pict.sdsu.edu/engage21st.pdf> [14.11.2013].

Rymarczyk, J. (2011). Eine 'stumme' Graphic Novel regt zum Sprechen an. Shaun Tan's 'The Arrival' szenisch umsetzen. In *Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*. 110/2011, 16-22.

Rymarczyk, J. (ed.). (2013). *Foreign Language Learning Outside School. Places to see, learn and enjoy*. Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Peter Lang.

Stanat, P. & Kunter, M. (2002). Geschlechterspezifische Leistungsunterschiede von Fünfzehnjährigen im internationalen Vergleich. In *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 1/2002, 28-48.

Surkamp, C. (2013). Experiencing plays as performances: the theatre as a place to learn outside of school. In J. Rymarczyk, (ed.),

Foreign Language Learning Outside School. Places to see, learn and enjoy, (pp. 129-145). Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Peter Lang.

Tan, S. (2006). *The Arrival*. South Melbourne: Lothian Books.

Jutta Rymarczyk

is professor of English as a Foreign Language at Heidelberg University of Education. Her current research interests include CLIL programmes at primary and secondary level. This is closely connected to the use of works of fine arts in the EFL classroom and in museums, i.e. visual literacy in general. In addition to this, she investigates how young learners (1st graders) learn how to read and write in two languages (English and German) simultaneously.

Karin Vogt

is a professor for Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Heidelberg University of Education. Her research interests include vocationally oriented language learning, classroom-based language assessment, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and media and telecollaboration in the foreign language classroom.



Si on n'aime pas lire, on peut toujours écouter. *Beethoven's Trumpet*, John Baldessari, 2007.